

## ALZHEIMER'S: YES OR NO!

Most of us age 55 and above will occasionally worry about contracting Alzheimer's Disease. Most of us probably know someone who has Alzheimer's or is caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's.

A good friend of mine is now totally consumed with caring for his wife afflicted with Alzheimer's. Worldwide, nearly 44 million people have Alzheimer's or a related dementia. By 2050, an estimated 160 million people worldwide will be diagnosed with Alzheimer's. It is most common in Western Europe (North America is close behind) and least prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa (See [www.alzheimer.net](http://www.alzheimer.net)).

1 in 9 Americans over 65 has Alzheimer's while 1 in 3 over 85 are afflicted with the illness. 2 in 3 people with Alzheimer's are women. All in all, the myriad statistics are sobering and frightening. Living each moment well seems the wise path.

### Defining Alzheimer's

Ever since Dr. Alois Alzheimer first described the brain disorder that would later take his name, Alzheimer's disease has eluded effective treatment and cure. This brain disease causes a gradual decline in memory, thinking, and reasoning skills. The biological definition of Alzheimer's entails the build up of sticky plaques of protein called amyloid that suffocate nerve cells, causing memory loss and the other impairments in cognitive functioning associated with Alzheimer's.

### Normal Cognitive Impairment

Some degree of memory loss and forgetfulness occurs in all of us as we age. It's wise to be gentle with ourselves and to not berate ourselves. Some conditions that may contribute to memory loss are depression (take a test online), medication side effects (talk to your physician), alcohol abuse (reduce intake), insufficient B12 or low thyroid level (get tested), stress (avoid it!), aging (obviously!) and illness in general (See [www.webmed.com](http://www.webmed.com)).

Toward the end of this article we'll address what we can do to ward off the onset of Alzheimer's; but for now we will differentiate between our almost inevitable memory impairments associated with normal aging versus extreme ones that disrupt our ability to function to a significant degree and are characteristic of Alzheimer's.

**Inevitable:** Forgetfulness. Most of us forget names or commitments but we remember the information eventually or when we are reminded.

**Extreme:** We just totally forget and we don't remember later or when reminded.

**Inevitable:** Arithmetic Mistakes

**Extreme:** Unable to concentrate well enough to follow printed instructions or pay bills.

**Inevitable:** Frustration with operating our smart phone, computer, TV, etc., but eventually we figure it out.

**Extreme:** Unable to work our stove or other familiar mechanical or digital gadgets.

**Inevitable:** We struggle to find the right word.

**Extreme:** We misname a familiar object. We speak half a sentence and never return to the thought to complete it.

**Inevitable:** We misplace needed and familiar objects like cell phones, TV remotes, car keys, etc.

**Extreme:** We place an object in an inappropriate place such as a fry pan in the freezer and we are unaware of the misstep. We become paranoid and accuse others of stealing.

**Inevitable:** We get set in our ways of doing things and resent interference or suggestions from others.

**Extreme:** We become discombobulated quickly and intensely when our routine gets derailed. We find ourselves feeling extremely isolated, alone, confused, afraid, suspicious or deeply depressed.

**Inevitable:** We tire more easily. Basic, reasonable demands of social living are occasionally more than we care to tackle.

**Extreme:** We can no longer keep up with minimum requirements of daily living. We avoid other people because our desire and energy are gone. We become socially isolated.

## Unusual Signs

While talking with my good friend who spends most of his waking hours with his wife who is a resident in an Alzheimer's facility, he emphasized how extremely difficult it is to stay positive as a caregiver. He recalled how in retrospect, his wife displayed the early signs of Alzheimer's 10 to 12 years prior to the actual identification of the disease. Some surprising early signs of brain disease having nothing to do with memory impairment are: (See [www.grandparents.com](http://www.grandparents.com))

- Law breaking activity such as stealing
- Falling frequently
- Forgetting the function of objects
- Eating inappropriate things
- Inability to recognize sarcasm
- Depression
- Unfocused staring

## Helpful Steps

- Stay positive. As we age it's so easy to get sour or negative without even realizing it. Ask friends for feedback.

- Place keys and other regularly used items in the same place. Avoid the frustration of seeking misplaced items.
- Do mentally stimulating/challenging activities each day. Try sudoku, crossword puzzles, learning to play a musical instrument, etc.
- Write lists. Make notes. Don't misplace your lists!
- Improve your diet, exercise discipline, social connections and medication management to slow and possibly reverse Alzheimer's symptoms (See Time Magazine, Nov. 23, 2015, page 38).

### **The Bottom Line**

Most of us as we age will experience the typical virtually inevitable age-related cognitive changes stated earlier herein. We need to be kind and patient with ourselves while adhering to the Helpful Steps we've mentioned. If you suspect that you or a friend might have any of the extreme signs of Alzheimer's, see your doctor as soon as possible.

With early treatment, some relief of symptoms is possible allowing a longer time of independent living. Also, with more time for planning, a more thorough investigation of options is possible. A truism: "aging isn't easy!" (See [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org))

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